DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 159 567 CG 012 847

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TITLE On the Nature of Social Knowledge.
SPONS AGENCY National Science Foundation, Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE Apr 78
GRANT BNS-77-11346; SOC-75-13872
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwestern Psychological Association (50th, Chicago, Illinois, May 4-6, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Beliefs; *Cognitive Processes; *Individual Psychology; *Interaction Process Analysis; *Interpersonal Competence; Interpersonal Relationship; Literature Reviews; Personality; *Psychological Patterns; Social Behavior; *Social Psychology

ABSTRACT

A perceiver's knowledge of a target person (T) can be seen as active, initiatory cognitive structures or conceptual schemas that guide and influence: (1) information processing about T; (2) search for and interpretation of new information about T; (3) remembrance and interpretation of previously-learned information about T; (4) social interaction between perceiver and T; and (5) evaluation of the accuracy of this knowledge. Perceiver's knowledge of T includes anticipations and, to the extent that anticipations guide subsequent thought about T, cognitive bolstering and behavioral confirmation are likely. Beliefs can and do create social reality. Social psychology should attend to the ways by which perceivers create the information they process in addition to probing the machinery of information processing itself. (JLL)

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ED159567

On the Nature of Social Knowledge

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Acknowledgements

This research was supported in part by National Science Foundation Grants SOC 75-13872, "Cognition and Behavior: When Belief Creates Reality", and BNS 77-11346, "From Belief to Reality: Cognitive, Behavioral, and Interpersonal Consequences of Social Perception", to Mark Snyder.

This manuscript was prepared as an invited contribution to a session on "Social Cognition" at the annual meetings of the Midwestern Psychological Association, Chicago, 1978.

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Running Head: Social Knowledge

April, 1978

CG012847

On The Nature of Social Knowledge

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It is a basic and undeniable fact of social life that we form impressions of other individuals whom we encounter in our day-to-day lives. In our relationships with others, we want to know not only what they do, but why they do what they do--to feel that we understand what (if any) motives, intentions, and dispositions underlie an individuals actions. Indeed, as a direct result of generations of theory and research on impression formation and person perception, we have learned a lot about how individuals process information to form beliefs and impressions of other people. Accordingly, we are quite knowledgeable about the antecedents of social knowledge.

But of what consequence are our beliefs and impressions of other people? What happens once impressions have been formed? How are our subsequent thoughts, actions, and interactions channeled and influenced by our impressions of others? It is to such concerns that I have addressed myself in a program of empirical and theoretical research on the cognitive, behavioral, and interpersonal consequences of social knowledge. For, I believe, it is only by understanding the consequences of social knowledge that we can understand the nature of social knowledge.

Our empirical investigations have been designed to chart the processes by which one individual's initially erroneous beliefs about another person (whom we designate a "target") can and do exert powerful channeling influences

on subsequent information processing and social interaction such that: (a) the cognitive reality of these initially erroneous beliefs is bolstered and strengthened, and (b) actions of the individual based upon these impressions cause the actual behavior of the target to confirm and validate the individual's initially erroneous impressions. The first of these processes is known as cognitive bolstering; the second, as behavioral confirmation.

Cognitive Bolstering Processes

Our investigations of cognitive bolstering have attempted to probe the manner in which current beliefs can influence subsequent information processes in ways that serve to bolster and strengthen these beliefs. Cognitive bolstering processes may be prospective and exert "before-the-facts" influences on the learning and interpretation of later-learned information about the target. Or, they may be retrospective and exert "after-the-facts" influences on the remembering and re-interpretation of previously-learned information about the target.

Most of our research on cognitive bolstering processes has been conducted in the domain of memory for the events of another person's life. Here we have been examining the ways in which current beliefs can and do exert powerful channeling effects on attempts to remember and interpret previously-learned factual events in another person's life history.

In one investigation of remembering, (Snyder & Uranowitz, in press), individuals read identical narratives about the life history of a woman named Betty K. One week later, these individuals learned information that induced different interpretations of Betty K: some participants learned that Betty K. was currently living a lesbian lifestyle: others learned that she was

currently living a heterosexual lifestyle; still others learned nothing about her lifestyle. This new knowledge then influenced their answers to factual questions about the actual events of Betty K.'s life. Participants reconstructed the events of this woman's life in ways that supported and bolstered their current stereotyped (but erroneous) interpretations of her sexual orientation. Participants who learned that Betty K. was living a lesbian lifestyle reconstructed the events of her life in a manner that reflected stereotyped beliefs about lesbians. Participants who learned that Betty K. was living a heterosexual lifestyle reconstructed the events of her life in a manner that reflected stereotyped beliefs about heterosexuals. This outcome occurred in spite of the fact that Betty K.'s life history was equally rich in factual events that "fit" with stereotyped concepts about heterosexual and lesbian women. Additional evidence suggested that these results are best characterized as the product of an interaction between stereotypic conceptions of female sexuality and genuine memory for factual events.

Reconstructive remembering is but one member of a family of cognitive bolstering processes. Even in the absence of a history to rewrite, current beliefs may guide the search for and the interpretation of new information about another person. In addition to retrospectively remembering "all the history that fits", we may prospectively notice "all the news that fits". All in all, current beliefs may initiate cognitive processes that augment and bolster their own cognitive reality.

Behavioral Confirmation Processes

Cognitive bolstering processes may provide the perceiver with an

"evidence base" that gives compelling cognitive reality to any traits that he or she may have erroneously attributed to a target individual initially. This reality is, of course, entirely cognitive: it is in the eye and mind of the beholder. However, beliefs may serve as grounds for predictions about the target's future behavior and may guide and influence the perceiver's interactions with the target. This process itself may generate behaviors on the part of the target that erroneously confirm the predictions and validate the beliefs of the perceiver. In our empirical research, we have demonstrated that beliefs may create their own social reality by channeling social interaction in ways that cause the stereotyped individual to behaviorally confirm the perceiver's stereotype.

In one investigation, we (Snyder et al., 1977) investigated the impact of stereotyped beliefs about physical attractiveness (e.g., "beautiful people are good people") on the unfolding dynamics of social interaction and acquaintance processes. We arranged for pairs of previously unacquainted individuals to interact in a getting acquainted situation (a telephone conversation) that had been constructed to allow us to control the information that one member of the dyad (the perceiver) received about the physical attractiveness of the other individual (the target). In anticipation of the forthcoming interaction, perceivers fashioned "erroneous" images of their specific discussion partners that reflected general stereotypes about physical attractiveness. Perceivers who anticipated physically attractive partners expected to interact with comparatively sociable, poised, humorous and socially adept individuals. By contrast perceivers faced with the prospect of getting acquainted with relatively unattractive partners fashioned images

of rather unsociable, awkward, serious, and socially inept creatures. Moreover, our perceivers had very different patterns of styles of interaction for targets whom they perceived to be physically attractive and unattractive. These differences in self-presentation and interaction style, in turn, elicited and nurtured behaviors in the targets that were consistent with the perceivers' initial stereotypes. Targets who were perceived (unbeknownst to them) to be physically attractive actually came to behave in a friendly, likeable, and sociable manner. The perceivers' stereotyped-based beliefs had initiated a chain of events that had produced actual behavioral confirmation of these beliefs. The initially erroneous impressions of the perceivers had become real.

Clearly, a perceiver's initial beliefs about another target individual may channel subsequent interaction between perceiver and target in ways that may cause the target's behavior or confirm these beliefs. But how stable and enduring are the effects of the behavioral confirmation process? Will behavioral confirmation be limited to the confines of the specific interaction between perceiver and target, or will it persevere to new interaction contexts with new perceivers? We (Snyder & Swann, 1978) have offered the following answers to these questions. If the "new" behaviors displayed by the target are not overly discrepant from his or her own self-image, then these new behaviors may be internalized and incorporated into the target's self-conception. If internalization occurs, then both the target and the perceiver will share conceptions of the target. The target may then be prepared to act on his or her new self-conception in contexts beyond those that include the original perceiver. Then the target may provide other perceivers with behavioral evidence consistent with the original perceiver's beliefs. Empirical

evidence suggests that internalization and perseveration are fostered and promoted when behavioral confirmation first occurs in environments that are structured to encourage targets to regard their new behaviors as representative reflections of their underlying stable traits and enduring dispositions (Snyder & Swann, 1978).

Reality-Testing Processes

Cognitive bolstering and behavioral confirmation together conspire to turn beliefs into self-perpetuating beliefs. For, these processes create an evidence base that provides all the support one needs to retain one's beliefs. Thus, in our investigations of reconstructive processes, participants remembered the facts of a target's life in ways that confirmed their current interpretations of the target's nature. In our investigations of behavioral confirmation, perceivers treated their targets in ways that caused them to confirm their initial beliefs. How then are we ever to learn that our beliefs are inaccurate? Are there any reality-testing procedures that might allow us to monitor and test the accuracy of our beliefs about others? What if participants in our reconstruction experiment were asked to review the life and times of Betty K, to determine whether--based upon their remembering of the facts--they think Betty K. is in fact currently living a lesbian lifestyle? What if participants in our behavioral confirmation investigation were asked to use their getting-acquainted conversation to determine whether their partners were actually physically attractive?

Were we to rewrite the scenarios of our reconstruction and behavioral confirmation experiments along these lines, we would essentially provide our participants with "hypotheses" about their targets and ask them to test

these hypotheses. In the former case, they would test their hypotheses by scrutinizing their memories in search of relevant previously-learned information. In the latter case, they would use their forthcoming interactions as testing-grounds to collect new "data" relevant to testing their hypotheses. As it happens, we have examined such processes of "reality-testing", both in the domain of memory and in the domain of social interaction.

To examine hypothesis-testing in the case where people can use remembered knowledge to cognitively test hypotheses about others, we (Snyder & Cantor, Note 1) had individuals read an identical account of the events in one week of the life of a woman named Jane. This knowledge provided them with an archival store of historical information about Jane's actions in different situations and with different people over a period of time. Two days later, they were asked to use this historical knowledge to test one of two hypotheses about Jane: that she was well-suited for a job that required the personal attributes of a prototypic extravert, or that she was well-suited for a job that required the personal attributes of a prototypic introvert. Our results indicated that the hypotheses being tested constrained not only the outcome of memory search and retrieval processes, but also, the ultimate fate of the hypothesis itself. To test their hypotheses, our participants preferentially remembered factual information that would confirm their hypotheses. To test the hypothesis that Jane was an extravert, hypothesis-testers were particularly likely to report instances of Jane behaving in accord with their construct of the prototypic extravert. To test the hypothesis that Jane was an introvert, hypothesis-testers were particularly likely to report instances of Jane behaving in accord with their

construct of the prototypic introvert. Moreover, to the extent that they preferentially reported hypothesis-confirming factual information that they had previously learned about Jane's background, they were particularly likely to accept their hypotheses.

Of course, people do not always have access to sufficient historical knowledge of a person's actions in diverse situations and over extended periods of time to test hypotheses by attempting to remember previously-learned information. In such situations, people must test their hypotheses by using their subsequent interactions as opportunities to actively gather behavioral evidence relevant to testing their hypotheses. To chart the processes of reality-testing in social interaction, we (Snyder & Swann, Note 2) provided participants ("reality-testers") in five separate investigations with hypotheses about the personal attributes of other individuals ("targets"). Reality-testers then prepared to test their hypotheses (e.g., that their targets were extraverts, or that their targets were introverts) by planning a series of questions to ask of their targets in a forthcoming interview. In each investigation, reality-testers planned to test their hypotheses by treating their targets "as-if" they were the type of person they were hypothesized to be: reality-testers planned to preferentially search for behavioral evidence that would confirm their hypotheses. To test the hypothesis that their targets were extraverted individuals, reality-testers were particularly likely to choose to ask precisely those questions that one typically asks of individuals already known to be extraverts (e.g., "What would you do if you wanted to liven things up at a party?"). To test the hypothesis that their targets were introverted individuals, reality-testers

were particularly likely to choose to ask precisely those questions that one typically asks of individuals already known to be introverted (e.g., "What factors make it hard for you to really open up to people?"). Moreover, these "as-if" search procedures channeled social interaction between reality-testers and targets in ways that caused the targets to provide actual behavioral confirmation for the reality-testers' hypotheses. Targets who were being "tested" for extraversion actually came to behave in sociable and outgoing fashion. Targets who were being "tested" for introversion actually came to behave in shy and reserved fashion.

In the light of these investigations of reality-testing, it becomes all the more understandable why so many popular beliefs about other people--in particular, clearly erroneous social and cultural stereotypes--are so stubbornly resistant to change. For, even if one were ever to develop sufficient doubt about the accuracy of these beliefs to proceed to actively test them, one would nevertheless be particularly likely to find all the evidence that one needs to confirm and retain these beliefs. And, in the end, one may be left with the secure (but totally unwarranted) feeling that these beliefs must be correct because they have survived (what may seem to the individual reality-tester) perfectly appropriate and even rigorous procedures for assessing their accuracy.

On the Nature of Social Knowledge

In the light of the outcomes of these investigations of the cognitive, behavioral, and interpersonal consequences of beliefs about other people, what can be said about the nature of social knowledge?

From my perspective, the perceiver's knowledge of another person (i.e., the target) may be seen as active, initiatory cognitive structures or conceptual schemas that guide and influence: (a) the processing of information about the target, (b) the search for and interpretation of new information about the target, (c) the remembering and interpretation of previously-learned information about the target, (d) the course and outcome of social interaction between perceiver and target, and (e) the evaluation of the accuracy of this knowledge. The perceiver's knowledge of the target includes anticipations of what events are to appear as the interaction unfolds, as well as anticipations of what information is to be found stored in memory. To the extent that these anticipations guide subsequent thought about the target, cognitive bolstering and behavioral behavioral confirmation are likely, if not inevitable, consequences of the active and initiatory nature of social knowledge.

In particular, the investigations of the interpersonal consequences of social knowledge (e.g., the investigations of behavioral confirmation and reality-testing processes in social interaction) make clearer just what it is that is inherently and fundamentally social about social knowledge. For, these investigations sensitize us to the links between the domain of thought and the domain of action. Beliefs can and do create social reality: the very events of the social world (specifically, the behaviors of others with whom we interact in social relationships) may be reflections and products of our images of the social world (specifically, our beliefs and theories about other people). Accordingly, if a cognitive social psychology is to be truly a social psychology, it must pay explicit attention to the ways by which

perceivers create the information that they process in addition to probing the machinery of information processing itself. This, of course means that social thought processes cannot be meaningfully studied in static circumstances of minimal personal involvement for the individual. For, such an approach may, unfortunately, blind us to the intimate interplay between social knowledge and social behavior in ongoing interpersonal relationships. Contemporary viewpoints in cognitive and perceptual psychology emphasize the active, integrative, and constructive aspects of human information processing. My viewpoint, although clearly compatible with this constructivist perspective on the formation of knowledge, goes at least one important step beyond this approach. Not only is knowledge (at least in the domain of social cognition) the product of active, constructive processes, but the very events that serve as the "raw materials" for this information-processing are themselves the product of active, constructive processes generated by the individual's beliefs.

Reference Notes

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